



# FEMA

## *New Developments' Construction Standards Require Wildfire Mitigation*

**Rancho Santa Fe, CA** – More than 2,460 multi-million-dollar houses, built to the highest construction standards possible including expansive defensible space around and within the home development areas, survived extremely well when the Witch Fire stormed through the area in October 2007.

The blaze burned up to plants on defensible spaces and stopped. Embers blown into areas of the estates bounced off tile roofs with boxed-in eaves, stucco walls, patios, and other areas, and died out without leaving more than incidental damage, basically scorched plants. A half-dozen charred embers the size of footballs were found in the Cielo estates, and “nothing was burned,” said Ken Crosby, one of the realtors for the estate areas.

Five Rancho Santa Fe developments, completed just three-plus years before the Witch Fire came, basically set construction standards on the “shelter in place” concept developed in Australia. The standards for construction and mitigation, including mandated interior fire sprinklers, extensive defensible space, and use of fire-resistant vegetation, are the “toughest in the country,” according to Cliff Hunter, fire marshal for the Rancho Santa Fe Fire Protection District, which provides fire protection for the five developments.

The strict development standards make homes in the shelter-in-place communities safer places to stay if residents are not able to evacuate from the areas, according to fire officials. They advise people to evacuate rather than stay to fight fires or simply shelter in place because their homes are considered to be safe refuge.

The estate homes were constructed with materials and techniques intended to make the structures as resistant as possible to effects of wildland fires. Only slow-to-ignite plants may be planted nearer to houses. The standards are strictly maintained by the Rancho Santa Fe Fire Protection District’s fire marshal.

The Sargenti home is on the eastern edge of The Crosby. There is a wide swath of defensible space adjoining the backyard. Smoke and ash came into their house through the drier vent, and there was smoke in the garage, Sargenti said.

The couple said they attended a program staged by the Rancho Santa Fe Fire Department to explain how the shelter-in-place program works. It was there they learned that the concept had not been tested in the United States and that they should “get out early” if they chose to evacuate, and what to do if they stayed.

The fire was coming their way that Monday, so they left. When the reverse 911 call came in at 9 a.m. that Monday morning, “we were long gone,” Sargenti said.

Steve Sargenti said he “knew [the] house was intact,” and when the family returned, they found their house was untouched, other than smoke inside. Embers that landed on the concrete tile roof had burned out, and the courtyard in front of the house “was a repository” for spent embers, he said. Two plants in the backyard were damaged.



San Diego County, California



### Quick Facts

Sector:  
**Private**

Cost:  
**Amount Not Available**

Primary Activity/Project:  
**Building Codes**

Primary Funding:  
**Private funds**